

THE DIARY OF MARY ANN NORRIS, 1818-1838

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IN the Public Archives of Nova Scotia among the long rows of red folders and imposing documents there are hidden many stories. Here one may find tales of adventure on the high seas between the pages of shabby log-books; stories of war and revolution couched in the stilled language of official correspondence; life stories of famous Nova Scotians revealed by their private letters and papers; and finally, stories of the Nova Scotian people. It is with one of the last that this paper is concerned, a girl named Mary Ann Norris, who lived between the years of 1801 and 1880, and spent most of her life in Cornwallis, a little village near the present Starr's Point, Kings County, Nova Scotia.

It was in the year 1797 that Robert Norris arrived in Halifax from England to begin his duties as a Church of England missionary in this colony. At that time Nova Scotia was little more than a handful of scattered settlements separated by long stretches of forest, the chief means of communication by sea. One of the settlements was Chester, and here Norris received his first appointment as missionary and preached the doctrine of Salvation, despising the sensational methods of Henry Alline's "New Lights."¹ Here also he met his wife, Lydia Prescott, sister of the Hon. Charles Prescott who was then amassing a fortune as a merchant of Halifax. On May 16, 1801, Mary Ann Norris was born, and in the same year the family moved to New Brunswick. Little is known of their five year-stay there but from later developments, it seems likely that they settled in Saint John. The year 1806 finds the Norrises again moving to make their permanent home in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia.

The family lived in a modest story and a half house with one chimney. It was shaped not unlike a Cape Cod cottage, and was surrounded by trees and shrubs, which made it appear quite picturesque. Downstairs there were two parlors, a drawing-room, and a kitchen, upstairs there were four small bedrooms nestled under the eaves of the steep roof. In this home the clergyman's family lived comfortably but with few luxuries.

While Mary Ann was still a small child her father must have preached many times in private houses, for the old Fox Hill church had fallen into disrepair and the new one was not

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1. A. W. H. Eaton, *History of Kings County*, pp. 253; 254.

opened for worship until 1810. One can imagine Robert Norris setting out for church in all kinds of weather, and, as soon as they were able to toddle, Mary Ann and her younger sister Catherine would be taken along beside their parents, as befit the clergyman's family. Little is known of their childhood, however, for it was not till 1818 that Mary Ann began to write her diary. She was then seventeen years of age.

From her diary one gets the impression that Robert Norris had a domineering nature, as when she complained: "Father is so horrible cross there is not any living with him." Another time she wrote: "My father with his abominable conduct has completely mocked me." Robert Norris' disposition no doubt suffered from his frequent attacks of gout—once he actually took an emetic "to carry off some of his ill humors." As early as 1821, Mary Ann wrote of her father as being "Very unwell", and a hurried message being sent to Dr. Bayard. Sometimes his illness interfered with church services, or with plans for family outings. In the winter of '24 Norris must have felt himself declining, for three neighbours were called in to witness his will. However, it was not for another five years that he gave up the duties in the parish and not for ten that the end came.

Probably the greatest outside influence on the life of the Norrises was their close connecton with the Prescott family. Lydia Norris' brother, the Hon. Charles Prescott, built a lovely colonial brick house in Cornwallis, which he called "Acacia Grove." In the beautiful grounds surrounding the house, Mary Ann and Catherine spent many happy hours with their Prescott cousins, who proved themselves quite original in entertaining. Once they put up a tent in the strawberry patch, where refreshments were served; another time they established a camp in the north yard for the entertainment of guests; and again the young Prescotts performed a play, showing considerable talent and causing great merriment among the spectators. There were other evenings when sounds of music echoed across the gardens of Acacia Grove while inside young people sang and danced, each one caught in the spell of warm hospitality. These happy times were one of the brightest spots in Mary's Ann life, and this contact with her uncle's family proved a great comfort when she lost her own.

There were two sides to Mary Ann Norris' character. One was gay, impulsive, and fun-loving—the Mary Ann who tore her frock running to see a handsome horse, who laughed merrily when a hired man fell through his chair, who lost a shilling or

two in a game of cards, and who loved nothing better than a dance or a party. The other Mary was sensitive and moody, sometimes even morbid, but always kind, affectionate, and deeply religious. This was the girl who wrote resentfully of scoldings from her parents and a lecture on slandering from "Aunt Abby" Whidden; who grieved to be parted from her sister after her marriage, and brooded over her mother's tragic death in 1826; who sat up many a night with a sick neighbour and attended her father faithfully during his long and painful illness. Her religious bent is shown not only by her faithful attendance at church, but also by her deep love of nature. The latter prompted her to write of a very beautiful eclipse of the sun that it "caused all nature to appear solemnized." Three events recorded in Mary Ann's diary caused the first side of her character to be gradually overshadowed by the second: first her sister Catharine's marriage, secondly, her mother's death, and lastly, her father's death.

Although Catharine was more than five years younger than Mary Ann, the two girls were very companionable, and often went riding, walking, and calling together. When Catharine was barely seventeen, however, a visitor arrived in the Norris home, who was to change the course of her life. Thomas Merritt was a "gentleman from St. John", who during his visit, attended the Norris girls on various outings. Nearly two weeks after his departure, Mary Ann wrote in her diary: "Heard a piece of news today which was that Mr. T. Merritt had made proposals to Kate to be his partner for life[;] hope it will end well." Shortly afterwards, Catharine received a set of tortoise shell combs from her fiancée, later a barrel of oysters arrived for her mother, and "a very elegant parasol for Mary Ann." After three short visits spread out over two years, Thomas Merritt married Catharine on November 12, 1825. Of that day's events, Mary Ann write:

Catharine and Mr. Merritt were married to-day. The wedding party consisted of my Uncle and Aunt Prescott, John, and Mary [Prescott] Thomas Campbell who was groomsman and our family with Miss Merritt, we all went to Church where the ceremony was performed and then returned home to dinner. Catharine came up in the evening a little after nine the party dispersed.

Mary Ann's lack of enthusiasm suggests that she may have imagined herself in Catharine's place. However, that may be,

the Merritts left Cornwallis two weeks after the wedding, their destination St. John, where they were able to make their home.

The next year saw the death of Lydia Norris while visiting Catharine in St. John. This left Mary Ann with the full care of her father, whose constant attacks of illness were a heavy burden during the next eight years. She tells of his screaming for a long time with the pain in his back, for there were no drugs to give relief. The last year of his illness must have seemed a nightmare, but she tended him devotedly until the end came on October 16, 1834. This left Mary Ann alone, and the last pages of her diary tell the story of how she managed both house and farm while continuing to be a prominent figure in church and community life. In this period, she emerges from the care-free girl of the '20's to the mature woman she became during her father's illness.

Such is the story of the Norris family up to the year 1838, when Mary Ann's diary comes to an end. The story is not one filled with excitement and drama, but the diary is of interest first because there are so few documents of this type in existence, and secondly because its pages contain many valuable comments on the life of a Nova Scotian community in the early nineteenth century. In the pages following, we shall look briefly at the impressions that Mary Ann Norris gives of various aspects of life in her time. Incidentally, all prices quoted in the succeeding pages have been changed from English currency to the equivalent in dollars and cents.

Section 2: Agriculture and Foods

Along with his pastoral duties Robert Norris managed a small farm and occasionally went to a meeting of the county Agricultural Society. Mixed farming was carried on in Kings county, as it is today, and it included the growing of fruit, vegetables, and grain as well as dairy farming in a small way. Vegetable gardens were started in April, when one might have seen Mary Ann Norris bending over the neatly-kept rows in her father's plot. Cutting the first asparagus seems to have been a landmark on the farmer's calendar for she makes a special note of it on May 11, 14, and 15, in three different seasons. Potatoes were planted towards the end of May. To assist in spring planting and other farm duties, Robert Norris used to hire one or two servants. Mary Ann remarks several times on their comings and goings, notably the going of a Yorkshire-

man who "behaved so bad papa was obliged to dismiss him."

Besides vegetables, grain was grown in Cornwallis township, for this was before the days when the western pairies had cornered the market on Canadian wheat. It was in grain-growing that dyke lands were of greatest importance. Wellington dyke, the largest in Kings county, was built during this period and has an exciting story. Begun in 1817, Cornwallis men worked on it for five years and by August of '22, it was nearly complete. The township was very proud of it, and groups of young people, among whom was Mary Ann Norris, would come to admire as the men worked. Mary Ann was very impressed, for it far exceeded her expectations. It enclosed 1000 acres of fertile marshland, and the farmers looked forward to rich crops of grain as reward for their hard labour. Then came disaster. Work on the dyke had been going on day and night and by mid-August of '22 the workmen were exhausted; they retired to rest and for the first time in weeks the dyke was deserted. Within a few hours the sea had broken through and on August 16, Mary Ann Norris heard the tragic news that the dyke had been swept away by the tide. As news of the disaster spread from home to home, high hopes were dashed to the ground, but the men of Cornwallis would not accept defeat. They set about to rebuild the dyke and the work progressed quickly. By September of '24 the Norris family were taking visitors to watch the men stop the tide and Mary Ann wrote proudly that they had succeeded. The dyke was completed the next year, and all Cornwallis joined in the celebrations. The work had cost some £20,000, but soon the reclaimed marsh was transformed into acres of golden grain and succeeding generations were to continue reaping the reward for the toil of the dyke-builders.¹

Even in these times fruit growing was an important industry in Kings county. By the early nineteenth century the township of Cornwallis was raising a great quantity of fruit,² with apples in the forefront as they are today. There were several strong promoters of the apple industry, among them Bishop Charles Inglis, who introduced the Bishop Pippin, and Colonel John Burbidge, who introduced the Golden Russet. The greatest promoter was Charles Prescott, who planted no less than *fifteen* new varieties in his spacious grounds.² No wonder that Mary Ann found the men grafting at Acacia Grove on some of her visits there, and that "Uncle Charles" came to breakfast with the Norrisses in order

1. Eaton. *op. cit.*, pp. 188-9; *Acadian Recorder*, Aug. 24, 1822.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 195-6, 204.

than it is today. A great many servants came and went in the course of Mary Ann's diary, but this is not surprising when we find that their wages varied between two and three dollars a month. One servant was exceptional, a girl named Mary who stayed with the Norrises for over six years. Mary Ann once confided to her diary as follows: "Did not go to Church today[;] let Mary . . . go and had to stay home myself to get dinner. a very improper thing."

Perhaps the most arduous of household duties was the washing. Mary Ann sometimes got up as early as two or three o'clock in the morning to do the wash, and once she stayed up all night for this purpose and had everything cleared away by six o'clock. If the washing took all night, the ironing must have taken most of the day, especially as it was done with hand irons heated on the stove.

In this period the making of quilts, rugs, and carpets was still a part of housekeeping. Quilting was carried on in a social way, as when Mary Ann held a profitable tea-party at which her guests helped her quilt a "handsome counterpane." Not so successful was the party that she describes as follows:

Miss Bayard, Sarah Campbell, Mary and Margaret Allison, Lavinia Whidden, Robert Buskirk and Elisha Dewolf dined with us. The ladies came to help us quilt but the Gentlemen were so troublesome all the morning that they would not allow them to do much.

Probably rugs and carpets were made at similar gatherings. Mary Ann tells of receiving a "very nice neat hooked rug" from a friend, and of making a new carpet for the "little parlor."

Heating the house was a real problem. Mary Ann rarely complains in her diary, but on one "dreadfully cold day" in January of '34 she remarks that "We cannot keep warm." The only heating that she mentions is a stove in the "back room", but without doubt there was also a fire place in one of the front rooms. Wood was generally used for fuel, the price ranging from \$1.20 to \$2.20 for a cord. Coal was not unknown, however, since Mary Ann's accounts show that she sold a bushel of coal for twenty-five cents. Perhaps a few coals were kept to hold fire over a length of time, since friction matches had not been invented.

Means of lighting were also relatively primitive, for this was the age of the tallow candle, and candle-making was still a part of housekeeping. Soon after a cow was killed, the women

of the house would prepare to use the tallow for candle-making: first the cotton wicks were strung on rods, then the rods were hung on poles, which in turn were suspended across the backs of two chairs. The final step was dipping. This involved melting tallow in a large kettle of boiling water, then dipping the rods into the boiling tallow one after another. 'One can picture Mary Ann and Catharine repeating this process many times on long winter evenings while the candles grew larger and larger and were finally ready to give their mellow flickering light.

Soap-making was another home industry. In the Norris home it was made in large batches so as to last for a season at a time. During one of these periods of soap-making, Mary Ann splashed some strong lye in her eye, a very painful accident. Sometimes more soap was made than was needed for home use and then Mary Ann would sell the liquid grease for twenty-five cents a gallon.

Such home industries were soon to be transferred to the factory, and already various types of factories were springing up in Kings county. In the manufacture of material, for example the 1820's and '30's were a period of transition. In earlier days, wool and linen material had been made entirely in Kings county homes, but by 1826 there were in Kentville and its vicinity two machines for carding wool, two factories for fulling and dyeing cloth, and a "flax mill nearly completed."² By '28 there was a carding mill on the Habitant River, followed a little later by one in Lower Canard. The transition from home to factory is seen in Mary Ann's diary notes for 1823, when in February she writes: "Mrs Jones has been here these two days carding wool", while on July her entry reads: "Mamma and Kate have gone to the Corner to the Carding machine." (The "Corner" refers to Kentville, which was called Horton Corner until given its present name in 1826.) Weaving was done by a local weaver, but it is likely that many still clung to the hand-loom used in their own homes. In the 1830's, Mary Ann sold linen cloth, no doubt woven at the flax mill in or near Kentville.

Leather was tanned locally and by the early '30's Kings county boasted four or five tanneries. One of these was Lowden's in Centerville, where one might have seen Mary Ann Norris riding up with a calf skin to sell or perhaps to be tanned and later sold. There was a shoemaker in the district who did mending and half-soleing and once made a pair of shoes for Mary

1. Eaton, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-9.

2. *Acadia Recorder*, April 15, 1826.

Ann for the sum of ninety cents. However, by this time, shoes were more frequently bought ready-made than made-to-order.

Other local industries included a pottery, where Mary Ann obtained flower pots; several grist mills, which supplied the people with flour;¹ and the blacksmith shop, so essential to horse-and-buggy travel. Of other local craftsmen, there was a Mr. Crawford, who repaired clocks, and a "tinman", who probably mended pots and kettles and perhaps made some as well.

Stores were not common in Cornwallis, but Mary Ann often mentions going to "Ritchie's", which seems to have been the equivalent of our "general store" in country places. For some articles she had to travel farther afield, as when she went to Habitant for shingles and to Kentville for a chest of tea. She also mentions going "over to Dewolf's store", which suggests that the store was across the Cornwallis river, either in Horton or Kentville.

These scattered references to factories, local industries, and stores, though seemingly trivial, are actually "signs of the times", for although she may not have been aware of it, Mary Ann Norris was living in the era of the industrial revolution when Nova Scotia shared in the widespread movement from hand-work to machinery and from home to factory.

Section 4: Medicine

It would be hard for us to imagine a doctor with no thermometer, no antiseptics and no drugs to ease pain, even harder to imagine an operation without anaesthetic. Nevertheless, these conditions existed in the early 1800's,² when disease was a much greater enemy to the public than today, for ignorance of its causes bred fear and superstition especially among the poor. The diseases mentioned in the Norris diary include measles, scarlet fever and whooping cough, but often Mary Ann mentions sickness without giving it a name. For instance during February and March of '37 there was an epidemic in Cornwallis that carried off at least three children, but its nature seems not to have been known. A striking illustration of the high death is found in Charles Prescott's family, for only four of his twelve children lived to be more than thirty-seven years of age.³

The worst epidemic to strike Nova Scotia in this period was the cholera plague, which visited Halifax in the autumn of '34.

1. Eaton, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-8.

2. Kenneth A. MacKenzie, M.D., "Abraham Gesner, M.D. . . 1797-1864", *Can. Med. Assoc. Journal*, 59, 384-387, 1948.

3. Eaton, *op. cit.*, p. 785.

Fear of the plague spread through the province, and on September 17, Mary Ann Norris wrote:

This being a day of general fast . . . appointed to be observed in consequence of the dreadful malady that is raging in Halifax, I went to Church and Mr. Campbell preached . . .

On October 11, she heard that the cholera was in St. John and "people dying very suddenly." Fortunately Cornwallis was spared this scourge, which ignorance shrouded with an even greater horror than prevails today.

Even less was known of mental than of physical ills, whether a patient was merely delirious or more permanently deranged. There was the case of the Norris servant, Rosanna, whose first symptom was an attack of "Hystericks which lasted some time." Several weeks later she was sent away to be nursed, but after her return Mary Ann said she was "taken quite crazy" and this time ran off to the "Scotchman's". Two days later she was somewhat better and after this apparently recovered.

Much more serious was the case of Mrs. Moss, whom Mary Ann visited in September of '32:

I went . . . to see Mrs. Moss who is staying at Charles Chipmans, and found her in a most distressed melancholy state thinks that all her relatives are in league against her to take her life, she has not eaten one mouthful for twelve days until the evening before when they forced a little wine into her mouth.

Of course there was no psychiatrist to attend such patients, and the only alternative to keeping them at home was to confine them in a jail or poorhouse.

The most common treatment for sick persons was to sit up all night with them. Many times Mary Ann sat up with a sick neighbour, for example on July 1, 1826, when she wrote:

Poor Mrs. Smith was unfortunate enough to give her child a dose of poison to-day instead of halm tea they sent for the Doctor to it. I sat up all night with the poor little thing Doctor drank tea at our house and stayed all night there so as to be near the child

Next morning the child was still ill but two days later was almost recovered. Of another nightly vigil Mary Ann wrote: "Mamma sent for me to come and sit up with Mrs. Burbidge who is very sick. I put a hot tile to her feet and burnt the bed."

Treatment included bleeding of patients, application of "blisters", and taking of emetics. There is no mention of medicine in the Norris diary except when Mary Ann bought "Eye wafer and Ointment" for twenty cents. When she was thrown from a gig and taken unconscious to a nearby house, one of the neighbours bled her before the doctor arrived. She does not mention what the doctor did, but all the neighbours came to see her and one stayed up all night with her. Six days later she was taken home by "Uncle and Aunt Prescott" but was still very weak, no doubt as a result of the bleeding.

The progress of surgery is illustrated by an operation performed on Mary Ann's eye. This was decided on very suddenly and in the words of the prospective patient, threw her "into great consternation." She went with her father to Halifax and was attended by her cousin, Edward Fairbanks. Since there were no anaesthetics, it is easy to believe her report that the operation was "very painful and unpleasant." For the next ten days her eye was extremely painful and she was not able to go out of the house for nearly six weeks. Her diary does not reveal whether or not the operation was successful, but at least she was able to resume all her former activities.

Probably the most common form of surgery was the extraction of teeth. Mary Ann writes of going into Dr. Harding's "Surgery" at Kentville, where he sometimes performed this operation though more often he went to the patient's home. Once he came to the Norris house for dinner previous to pulling a tooth for Mary Ann. One may picture her sitting uncomfortably during the meal imagining the ordeal to come, but when all was over, she wrote that in spite of her fear it came very easily. Dr. Webster of Kentville also pulled teeth, and one of his patients was Mary Ann's nephew, Robert Merritt. On at least one visit to Dr. Webster, Robert forgot his usual good manners, and, in the words of his aunt "behaved very bad indeed," While in Halifax in 1838, Mary Ann wrote of getting her teeth "plugged", a term used in the early days of dental fillings.

In general, it may be said that whatever advantages the life of a century and a quarter ago held over today, the treatment given by doctors was not one of them. This is no reflection on the ability of the medical practitioners of the day, but rather a tribute to the marvellous advances made in the science of medicine since that time.

(To be concluded)